Firm Foundation

2010 SEGD Fellows Virginia Gehshan and Jerome Cloud have built their practice on intellectual rigor, systemic thinking, and a user-centered approach to information architecture.

When Virginia Gehshan and Jerome Cloud forged their design partnership in 1986, they intended to build an idea firm—one that leaned toward innovation and away from quick turnaround, fast-money projects. Two-and-a-half decades later, clients seek them out for their thorough research and analysis, methodical design process, and perspective that recognizes signs are just one of many physical expressions of a brand or place.

Cloud Gehshan Associates may be best known for its groundbreaking work on large, multi-component projects such as university campuses, medical centers, and park systems. Their work integrates identity, storytelling, signage, and information systems in a process they call placebranding.

They are also innovators. The firm was the first to incorporate sculptural elements into directional signage (University Center, Baltimore), created the first exterior interactive wayfinding kiosks (Johns Hopkins University), and created one of the first prototypes for branding, interpretation, and signage for the U.S. National Heritage Corridor system.

Both are teachers and lecturers on design issues, and Gehshan—a past SEGD board member and president—authored many of SEGD's foundation documents, including its Standard Form of Agreement, Process Guide, Fee Guidelines, and model RPF.

The partners talked with segdDESIGN recently about the role of process, passion, and social consciousness in their work.

Q When you entered Cornell (Virginia), you had never heard of design. And starting at the Philadelphia College of Art (Jerome), you thought you wanted to be an illustrator. How did you find your way to design careers?

Virginia: I was interested in psychology. I enrolled in the standard freshman courses, but needed an elective and discovered the design curriculum while paging through a course catalog. I took an introductory design class and loved it. I switched to product design (Design & Environmental Analysis) the next year and never looked back. It opened my eyes to a whole different world.

Jerome: I thought I wanted to become an illustrator, but found my 2-D and 3-D classes much more engaging. I went to a presentation of student work by a young Swiss named Hans Allemann, an instructor in the graphic design department. I remember him describing the student exercises as a "visual language." I was captivated by the typography studies and posters the students were working on. It seemed a bit arcane and mysterious, but it appealed to me. My subsequent study of drawing, color, typography, form, and image taught me to approach a problem in a systematic way without preconceptions. The process instilled in me the belief that I would find an acceptable solution and if I really applied myself, I might even find something unique.

> "Theirs is a humanistic approach to design. Cloud Gehshan have for over two decades provided beautiful solutions that engage the mind and elevate the spirit."
>
> —David Gibson,
> Two Twelve

Q What were your first design jobs, and how did you become involved with EGD?

Virginia: I did some retail signing and exhibit design for Noel Mayo, an industrial designer who was my first employer. Then I worked for Daroff Design, an interior design firm. Most of my work was EGD for high-end corporate office buildings. I learned a lot, working side by side with the interior designers and architects.

When I started my own firm, my first project was for Garden State Park racetrack. It was a very complex project with 49 buildings and a large site. I had to learn a lot very quickly. I developed a kit of parts (colors, fonts, racing silk patterns) from which to design the hundreds of individual signs. I wanted each area to be unique while still contributing to a cohesive identity overall.

Jerome: I first worked for John Andrew Gallery, director of the Office of Housing and Community Development in Philadelphia. He had pulled together a group of young people just out of architecture and planning school, a kind of think tank dedicated to addressing the urban decay in Philadelphia's neighborhoods. I designed and produced a bi-lingual newspaper that chronicled the office's policies, achievements, and programs.

Next I worked for Alina Wheeler and Joel Katz, who had just formed Katz Wheeler Design. I was their first hire. We did identity, print, maps, diagrams, and some signage. Joel gave me a set of publications called "Choice or Chance," created to introduce inner-city grade school kids to architecture, urban planning, and design. The series was created by the Group for Environmental Education, which included John Gallery, Richard Saul Wurman, and Stefan Geissbuhler. Here were an urban planner, an architect, and a graphic designer working in close collaboration to bring these conversations into the classroom. This series gave me the sense that working as a traditional graphic designer wasn't going to connect me with the communities and ideas I cared about.
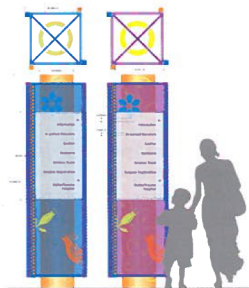
1. Historic Addiriyah (2009–present)
We are bringing a world heritage site to life by creating a brand palette for Addiriyah and its eight precincts, then designing comprehensive wayfinding and interpretive signage. All graphic elements will be in both Arabic and English. Materials, including Cor-ten steel and limestone, are designed to complement the mud-brick architecture and the region's current push for modernity and technology.

2. New York-Presbyterian Hospital/ Columbia University Medical Center (2003–06)
For this comprehensive sign system, we began with a branding study that examined how to present the hospital and university both separately and together. This included diagramming the institutional relationships, building ownership, and sign sequence to clearly understand what the public should see when navigating the 27-building campus. Consistency, clarity, and use of the logotypes as "overbrands" or "underbrands" were all important in prioritizing wayfinding information, and extensive visitor testing was essential.

3. American Veterans Disabled for Life Memorial (2006–present)
Dedicated to the more than 3 million American veterans living with permanent disabilities, the Washington, D.C., memorial will capture the voices of those who served and sacrificed for their country. Quotations aimed at conveying emotion and dignity will be inscribed in 50 freestanding glass panels, integrated with a series of large-scale images and bronze figures by artist Larry Kirkland.

4. Forbidden Drive (2000–07)
This comprehensive sign system informs and educates park users. It includes park maps and rules, vehicular and pedestrian directional signs, and interpretive signs that cover subjects ranging from animals and plants to historic buildings and dams. Through this wealth of information, citizens become more aware of their public spaces, leading to a sense of pride and increased stewardship.

5. Hamad Medical City (2007–09)
Authenticity is a crucial ingredient in effective placemaking; the more genuine, the more long-lasting it will be. The abundant cultural resources of Qatar—architecture, textiles, art, and native flora and fauna—provided inspiration for our graphic wayfinding program for Hamad Medical City in Doha. Images of familiar animals such as the Arabian horse and the camel will provide amusement for young patients in the pediatric facility. In the three adult facilities, we pay homage to traditional calligraphy and geometric patterns.

> *"Cloud Gehshan are leaders in both the practice and building of the profession of EGD. The firm leads by example with exemplary design and innovative practice, and Virginia has made enormous contributions to SEGD over her many years of involvement."*
>
> —Sarah Speare,
> *colleague and former SEGD executive director*

How did Cloud Gehshan get started?

Jerome: We met at a local AIGA meeting in 1985. We had both admired each other's work. Initially we decided to share space, and I moved into Virginia's office, which was on the first floor of her home. We ran our separate practices side-by-side and slowly began pursuing projects together as Cloud Gehshan Associates. Eventually, we phased out our original companies and merged.

It was also an amazing time because our children were around the same age, and were all enrolled in the nursery school next door to Virginia and her husband Gary's house. The yards were connected so we got to interact with our children every day. I would roll in with my son in the morning and head back home with him each evening. The whole thing just felt so perfectly tied together. I didn't feel the stress that so many parents experience of working long days and not seeing their children as much as they'd like.

What is your partnership like?

Virginia: We often disagree. Although it can bewilder the staff, we think it's a good thing—we have to talk through issues to reach a conclusion. But overall we have the same core values and fundamental philosophies.

Jerome: It's really been the most extraordinary gift of my career to have someone with whom I truly connect, whose values and judgments I feel in sync with. I'm not saying we agree on everything. We're both very competitive. But we're interested in ideas, not styles, and we can always rely on each other's integrity and commitment. We believe in the power of design to impact people's lives in positive and memorable ways.

What are the core philosophies that guide your design practice?

Virginia: A love of cities, towns, and Main Street. The desire to make a positive and lasting social contribution. And having a "sense of other," both for the client and for the client's audience. Only by putting yourself in their shoes can you design effectively.

Jerome: We believe clients seek us out because of our thoughtful process in analyzing problems, our ability to develop innovative, strategy-based solutions, and our drive to deliver results that exceed expectations.

At the same time, we've supported family-centered values, and have tried to inspire the best in people. This means we measure success by what we embrace, what we create, as well as who we include and how we manage our projects.

Your work is often founded on human factors and environmental analysis research. Why is that important?

Jerome: One of the unique aspects of our process is the involvement of an environmental psychologist at the front end. Peter Hecht's knowledge provides us grounding in human cognition and the factors important to helping people navigate space.

Virginia: Most designers think of wayfinding as a trail of breadcrumbs, getting people from Point A to Point B by signing all the decision points. That's one way to approach it. We look at the bigger picture. Rather than responding to what's there, we can rethink the system and manage the arrival and navigation sequence from the front end.

You've also refined your process for capturing your clients' perspective and defining the unique problems associated with each project. How does that work?

Jerome: One of the tools we've developed over the years is message mapping. We spend a lot of time with our clients trying to coax out what they're trying to achieve, what they think about themselves, and where they think they should be headed. Our visual mapping/audit is a system architecture that allows us to move away from subjective factors and identify objective ones, which helps the group come to consensus.

Virginia: As a designer, you never want to have a great answer to the wrong question! This is an amazing tool that helps us define or redefine the problem. It's a valuable point of reference that our clients use to write letters, raise funds, or describe project goals internally. And it's a touchstone for our design team.

In an ever-more-complex built environment, how do you think the role of signage and graphic communications is changing?

Virginia: Once exotic, EGD is now commonplace; it is a given on many project types. More clients are aware of it. And as environments grow increasingly complicated, the need for EGD is more clear. There is no question that EGD will become more and more integral to projects, both because of greater awareness and increasing complexity.

Electronically-based wayfinding and interpretation elements will be incorporated into more and more design solutions. But the social space will change, and not necessarily for the better. I recently went to a design exhibit where everyone was plugged into iPods. They got lots more information but the exhibition space was eerily silent. No one was discussing or debating the content, and people were not sharing thoughts or laughter. The space was dead.

Jerome: In the past 20 years, we've seen rapid growth in our field as new technological infrastructure has been put in place. The last decade feels like prologue to the next phase of even more rapid innovation. I'm certain the range of tools and services we can provide and deploy in the service of our clients and their communities has already expanded beyond our ability to keep pace.

As a result, environmental design will increasingly become a profession of allied disciplines. These alliances are the only way we will achieve the kind of cross-platform integration of information that our clients and their communities need to function and be effective. Everything we know will continue to be important and useful, and everyone we know with special knowledge and skills will be potential members of an extended team...a fine-tuned network of specialists with each link improving the next. X

6. The University of Texas at San Antonio (2009-10)

As part of the campus master plan, we assessed best practices for visitor maps, both digital and printed, including databases, content, human factors, design, and evolving technologies. We then designed a comprehensive vehicular and pedestrian sign system including gateways, directionals, orientation stations, sheltered kiosks, parking ID, maps, banners, and building identification.

7. Johns Hopkins University Homewood Campus "i-Site" kiosk (2003)

A network of 12 computerized kiosks created one-stop wayfinding centers for visitors. Recognizing that different people would access the information in different ways, we provided three access points: touch the map, the LCD screen itself, or push one of the buttons. The anodized-aluminum map works like a conventional static map, but is also interactive.

8. Midland, Michigan (2004-07)

Home to Dow Chemical Company and Dow Corning, Midland, Michigan, boasts an unusual collection of early modern architecture designed by Alden Dow, a disciple of Frank Lloyd Wright. The wayfinding system identifies the city's five major districts and helps visitors find cultural, shopping, and recreational destinations.

9. The University of Texas at Austin (2005)

UT Austin has thousands of first-time visitors, a densely packed central campus, ongoing construction projects, and multiple visitor garages. We developed a comprehensive pedestrian and vehicular sign system that provides immediate help by better defining campus edges, providing highway trailblazers, creating standards for banners, and improving pedestrian wayfinding.
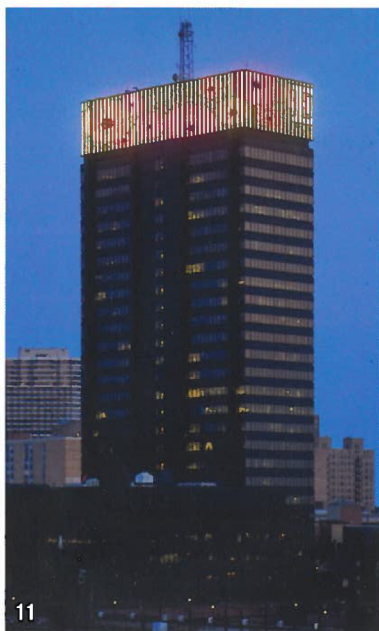
10. University Center (1994)

Finding ways to express our clients' visions of themselves in physical ways has been a big part of our practice. The sign vocabulary for this huge complex is based on the double helix—the building block of life—reflecting the university's focus on biotechnology and the life sciences. This was the first time metallic sculptural elements were added to directional signage.

11. PECO (2009-present)

A beloved Philadelphia landmark for over 30 years, the digital messages atop Philadelphia Electric Company's building have announced countless events important to the city. But the display was a dinosaur, with inefficient bulbs, primitive software, and aging components. We studied options for changing over to LED lights, researching the latest display technologies and operating systems. The resulting LCD display has a wealth of capabilities for both video and static images.